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SUBJECT: SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH DISPUTE ECHOES DESCENT OF
NATIONALIST POLITICS

Summary

¶1. (SBU) In the wake of Serbia's presidential, parliamentary, and local elections, wherein nationalist politics experienced a marked loss in popular support, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) also is undergoing internal debate over its future orientation. Long-simmering disputes and tensions within the SOC have been thrust into the public domain, largely fueled by a series of charged statements by the SOC Holy Synod and Raska and Prizren Bishop Artemije. This unprecedented airing of the SOC's dirty laundry followed Artemije's attempt to relieve his subordinate, Bishop Teodosije, of his position as Head of Decani Monastery in Kosovo. The Holy Synod staunchly the wound in an inconclusive meeting on August 26, but conflict within the SOC continues to fester. End Summary.

Decani Monastery "Revolution"

¶2. (U) On August 23, Bishop of Raska and Prizren Artemije attempted to depose Vicar Bishop of Lipljan and Head of Visoki Decani Monastery Teodosije, as well as Teodosije's assistant Father Sava Janjic, accusing the two men of insubordination and creating a parallel authority. The clergy and monks of Decani Monastery refused to accede to this decision, a gesture which Bishop Artemije characterized as an "open rebellion" against his authority, which stretches from central Kosovo to Sandzak in south-central Serbia. The Holy Synod, in a break from Orthodox doctrine wherein bishops have supreme authority over their bishoprics, sided with the deposed clergy, quickly issuing a press statement describing Artemije's decision as "ill-advised and regrettable."

¶3. (U) Following a physical confrontation between Bishop Artemije's delegation and the monks of Decani on August 24, which left one of Artemije's associates with a minor leg injury, the conflict burst into the public consciousness through a series of increasingly inflammatory statements and press releases.

¶4. (SBU) In an attempt to limit damage and rope in the feuding parties, the Holy Synod, headed by Metropolitan Amfilohije, devoted its regularly scheduled August 26 session to the events in Decani Monastery. The session, to which the Holy Synod summoned Artemije and Teodosije, ended inconclusively. The Synod press release after the session announced a "unanimous decision to halt all the disputes and decisions in Decani Monastery," meaning that Teodosije would keep his position for the time being. However, the statement added that key decisions on this and other issues would be taken by the Holy Assembly of Bishops, next scheduled to meet in October.

Political Leader or Spiritual Guardian?

¶5. (U) Many local media speculated that the primary reason behind the conflict was political. Several press reports alleged an improper relationship between a construction company founded by Bishop Artemije and affiliated with Raska and Prizren Diocese and former high-ranking officials, including Prime Minister Kostunica

and Minister of Infrastructure Velimir Ilic.

16. (SBU) More significantly, the core of the conflict appears to be the Church's policy on Kosovo, reflecting the issues that brought down Prime Minister Kostunica. Mirko Djordjevic, a sociologist focusing on religious issues, told us on August 27 that the conflict between Artemije and Teodosije was about whether the SOC in Kosovo should cooperate with the international community and Kosovo institutions. Artemije, as a conservative leader of the pro-Kostunica, hard-line clique in the SOC, is against any cooperation with the international community or the Kosovo authorities, while moderate Bishop Teodosije believes the priority of the SOC should be the "living church," in other words the well-being of its believers in Kosovo, a stance reflected in the policies of President Tadic's pro-European coalition. Though over the years Metropolitan Amfilohije has appeared more aligned with Artemije's views, in fact, he recently has demonstrated a more practical approach. He consistently has agreed to meet with the Ambassador, for example, while Artemije in Kosovo was pursuing a strict policy of no-contact with USG officials.

Comment

17. (SBU) The Artemije affair has made public the divisions within the SOC over how both to proceed with Kosovo and also reorient itself to a pro-European Serbia. Kostunica and the nationalists, including the Radicals, used the church to stoke the nationalist fires. This was demonstrated recently more vividly on February 21 when Kostunica was shown on national television deep in prayer as demonstrators loyal to him torched the U.S. Embassy. Church officials, most significantly Amfilohije, were quick to condemn the violence. As 94-year-old Patriarch Pavle continues his

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improbably-long twilight, church officials are actively circling to set the direction for the Church's future. The slap-down of Artemije is a hopeful sign that the more progressive forces in the Church are gaining strength. End Comment.

MUNTER